

THE U.S. NAVY

Into Africa

Jonathan Stevenson

Although Africa has long been a low strategic priority for the United States, Washington now has a sharp and pronounced strategic interest in protecting access to rich reserves of sub-Saharan oil and gas, mainly in the vicinity of the Gulf of Guinea, as part of its drive to reduce dependence on Middle East suppliers. By 2010, Africa's share of U.S. oil imports could rise to 20 percent, and China has begun to engage the United States in a geopolitical contest for hydrocarbons and other economic and political benefits in sub-Saharan Africa. There are also roughly 400 million Muslims in Africa, and Muslim radicalism has been on the rise in countries like Nigeria and Somalia, the latter of which has become a hot training destination for aspiring jihadists. Weak and failed states are vulnerable to co-optation by bad actors, and there are more of them—the two of greatest concern being Islamist-governed Sudan and anarchic Somalia—in sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else. Some of Africa's problems are of interest to the United States as a matter of philosophical values, as opposed to immediate strategic interests. Poverty and disease (HIV/AIDS in particular) pervade the continent, and many of Africa's fifty-three nations are politically unstable or economically dysfunctional or are run by malign regimes. Zimbabwe, for example, is afflicted by all of these scourges.

Accordingly, the Department of Defense conceived Africa Command, or

AFRICOM, to help Africans help themselves and to frame Africa, for purposes of formulating and implementing American foreign policy, as an end in itself rather than the geopolitical construct that it was during the Cold War. The idea is for the U.S. military to

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stress the prevention of and, contingently, preparation for insecurity through building African military capacity rather than to default to mere crisis management. AFRICOM would become a key component in an interagency effort to use especially “nonkinetic” military resources (e.g., command, control, and communication assets; engineering capabilities; and public health expertise) to provide more readily benefits related to humanitarian assistance and development, as well as improvements in defense infrastructure, and to support (not control) African leadership.¹ Announcing AFRICOM’s creation in February 2007, a Pentagon spokesman said that many of its missions would in fact be nonkinetic ones, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and that the command would be set up mainly for preventing war and establishing stability.²

Yet Africans have not easily bought into Africa Command. Washington’s public-relations rollout of AFRICOM in early and mid-2007 came at an inopportune time, when the security situation in Iraq was deteriorating and U.S. forward military activity was perceived, at worst, as imperialistic and recklessly inept or, at best, as focused exclusively on counterterrorism and devoid of any broader effort to help host nations. Amplifying this problem, the official line on AFRICOM was scattershot. The Defense Department first bruited the possibility of new American military bases in Africa, then blandly cast the new command as simply a bureaucratic reorganization that rationalized responsibility for the continent by unifying it (except Egypt) under a single combatant command. The Pentagon’s statement that the new command’s focus would be preventing rather than fighting wars came later. In yet another tonal shift, the State Department in April 2008 portrayed AFRICOM’s inception as “history in the making.”³

The mixed signals in these official characterizations of AFRICOM have fueled rising fears of American hegemony and the “militarization” of America’s Africa policy. Africa Command currently operates out of the headquarters of European Command—which previously had responsibility for West Africa—in Stuttgart, Germany, with supporting Army and Navy components based in Vicenza, Italy, and Naples, Italy, respectively. Only war-torn Liberia has offered to host an AFRICOM regional headquarters. The fourteen-nation Southern African Development Community voted expressly not to do so. Algeria and Libya unceremoniously ruled out the possibility, and Morocco—the closest ally of the United States in North Africa—has shown no enthusiasm. In December 2007, Nigeria officially rejected a request that it agree to be the venue for a regional headquarters and encouraged other African nations to follow its lead; Ghana, arguably the most pro-American country in West Africa, did so. In May 2008, AFRICOM put aside plans for a permanent regional headquarters and decided instead to place staff in embassy-based offices of defense cooperation, on an as-needed basis.⁴ More recently, African resistance to AFRICOM appears to be

diminishing, but the neuralgic attitude of African populations and governments toward American “boots on the ground” is durable. Given that reality, it is salutary that the U.S. Navy, rather than the Army, is taking the lead in a new strategic effort in Africa.

THE AFRICA PARTNERSHIP STATION

This endeavor is the “Africa Partnership Station,” or APS, a small and varied group of warships that completed a six-month tour in the Gulf of Guinea, the first of its kind in that region, in April 2008.⁵ The APS’s lead element was the USS *Fort McHenry* (LSD 43), a 610-foot amphibious landing ship whose shallow draft and multiple shore-connecting modes eased the task of pursuing concurrent operations in several locations. Other Navy ships involved were the high-speed vessel (HSV) *Swift*, a 322-foot catamaran originally meant for mine warfare and for developing littoral combat concepts; the USS *Annapolis* (SSN 760), a nuclear attack submarine; and the 567-foot USS *San Jacinto* (CG 56), a guided-missile cruiser. Part of the Navy’s Global Fleet Station program, the APS is based on the recently refined strategic concept of “maritime sector development.” The operational goal is to establish maritime safety and security by building African naval capabilities in maritime domain awareness, military professionalism, technical infrastructure, and operational response. The strategic objective is to make African nations both self-sufficient in maintaining maritime security and more favorably disposed toward the United States, through relationships enriched through the operation of the APS itself.

The notion of a “thousand-ship navy”—mooted by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, in 2005, when he was Chief of Naval Operations—contemplates a set of navies aligned with that of the United States with total assets of as many as a thousand vessels.⁶ More particularly, Admiral Harry Ulrich—as (before his recent retirement) commander of Naval Forces Europe (NAVEUR), with a pre-AFRICOM area of responsibility that covered the Gulf of Guinea—believed that the Navy had to do something operationally constructive between maritime wars. To him, this meant disabusing African governments of any grandiose dreams they might have of acquiring power-projecting blue-water navies that they did not really need, while encouraging and supporting their efforts to develop brown-water patrolling and policing capabilities that would address immediate maritime security demands and to establish interoperable forces that would engender a truly regional capability.⁷ The APS concept is designed to develop mutually advantageous relationships—that is, partnerships—rather than dependencies. For African nations, there are strong motivations to cooperate. A quarter of the cocaine consumed in Europe is transshipped through West Africa. Some 60 percent of the world’s human

trafficking occurs in sub-Saharan Africa. Attacks in Africa were largely responsible for the 10 percent global increase in piracy in 2007. Sub-Saharan Africa loses a billion dollars a year to illegal fishing, and illegal oil bunkering in Nigeria alone sucks three million dollars a day from the legitimate economy. Further, African nations share global strategic objectives, such as counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction and interdiction of the narcotics traffic.

In formulating and honing the Africa Partnership Station concept, NAVEUR under Admiral Ulrich carefully considered what message it would send to African populations and governments and how it would affect their views of the United States—in a phrase, strategic communication. Barring outright armed intervention, NAVEUR decided, it made sense to operate from ships, without the political and psychological baggage that came with a big American ground presence. Hence, the APS would make long-term patrols with frequent but relatively brief stops, offering operational training to build durable ties and community outreach programs to improve local goodwill. Thus, the program seems a sensible diplomatic remediation of a George W. Bush-era foreign policy that has, on balance, alienated foreigners and made overseas partners more tentative about their links with Washington. At the same time, the creation of AFRICOM appears to signal a pragmatic and largely apolitical reorientation of American military priorities in an epoch of Middle East instability, a reorientation that stresses the protection of non-Middle East oil supplies and the containment of Islamic radicalism and terrorism.

THE APS AND THE NAVY'S STRATEGIC RELEVANCE

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the U.S. Navy helped reestablish maritime security in Africa during the small naval wars against the Barbary pirates. About a hundred years later, Theodore Roosevelt's "gunboat diplomacy"—employed to consolidate American primacy and bolster American political and economic interests—followed from Alfred Thayer Mahan's theory of sea power, which cast a powerful blue-water U.S. Navy as the vehicle and guarantor of national economic prosperity and international political clout. Neither model, however, neatly fits with the APS, which is the product of innovative twenty-first-century thinking within the Navy. It was the commander of Naval Forces Europe—not the Office of the Secretary of Defense or the State Department—who convened and hosted the inaugural Gulf of Guinea Maritime Security Conference, in October 2004. The Navy's theater security engagement plan, anchored by the APS, has been more enterprising vis-à-vis Africa than has planning by other elements of the U.S. interagency framework.

The APS also appears well designed to meet the Navy's internal challenges. Of the four major services, the Navy has the smallest pieces of the counterterrorism

and counterinsurgency “pies” and therefore faces budgetary disfavor in the short term. Strategically, it is incumbent on the Navy to husband its resources for any blue-water naval challenge from China in decades to come, while bureaucratically the service needs to secure a role in safeguarding more urgent American interests, such as ensuring access to oil and winning hearts and minds in places that could otherwise prove vulnerable to Islamic radicalism. The Navy has understood that a large American ground-force presence could undermine both of these key American strategic interests in Africa, by discomfiting local populations and moving people to active opposition to the United States. Maritime initiatives like the APS, however, are inherently less intrusive than ground-based ones; with the Navy in front, the United States could win over African governments and populations and shore up local goodwill. While the Navy may carry some historical baggage as a practitioner of gunboat diplomacy, the Africa Partnership Station projects a more benign image to potential allies, partners, and even adversaries.

Of course, certain U.S. ground-based military efforts in Africa may be unavoidable with respect to American interests, values, or both. Accordingly, in continuing to clarify the uses of Africa Command for public consumption, Washington should acknowledge openly and clearly that two of the new command’s biggest challenges may end up as sustaining energy security for mutual benefit, as well as peacekeeping and state building, which the Pentagon is weaving more thoroughly into U.S. military doctrine.⁸ It should note further that AFRICOM will provide the United States with bureaucratic means for enhancing diplomatic and military-to-military relationships with key African states and regional organizations the better to meet these challenges. The United States should also emphasize its official preference that African forces or United Nations peacekeeping contingents, rather than the American military or U.S.-led coalitions, be used in African territory.

At first blush, such a dispensation seems to cut against the Defense Department’s reconfiguration of the ground-force structure through the dramatic expansion of the remit, personnel, and budget of U.S. Special Operations Command. The Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTf-HOA), which will become an AFRICOM asset, constitutes an early example of this new bias. It has facilitated impressive regional partnerships and a desirable inter-agency approach to humanitarian assistance and military-to-military training programs, but most Africans see that force mainly as a hard counterterrorism tool—its most visible effort being support of the Ethiopia-led occupation of Somalia and targeting of suspected terrorists there, sometimes with regrettable and politically inflammatory civilian losses. Thus, CJTF-HOA tends to signify uses of force that jeopardize rather than advance the long-term strategic

position of the United States in Africa.⁹ Accordingly, the suggestions of some American officials that Africa Command's prospective mode of engagement should be modeled on CJTF-HOA's local-capacity-building mission seem dubious.¹⁰ Instead, the policy thrust should be toward increases in AFRICOM funding for foreign military financing, international military education and training, and peacekeeping operations—to all of which the APS would contribute. This would at once accelerate the American objective of building African military capacity, improve interoperability critical for any combined deployments that may become necessary for peace enforcement or peacekeeping, and validate the stated U.S. intention to help Africans to help themselves.

So framed, Africa Command should become more acceptable than it initially has been to African governments and populations and ultimately win their approval, or at least acquiescence. Yet the Africa Partnership Station has already earned the confidence and enthusiastic participation of most littoral West African states, and it remains at once the most operationally effective and politically agreeable component of the military engagement of the United States with sub-Saharan Africa. In that light, it may well prove Africa Command's most politically valuable strategic asset.

NOTES

This article represents the views of the author alone and is not intended to reflect the official position of the U.S. Navy, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency.

1. See, e.g., "AFRICOM: The United States' New Combatant Command," *IISS Strategic Comments* 13, no. 2 (March 2007). See also, for further background, Kathi A. Sohn, "The Global Fleet Station: A Powerful Tool for Preventing Conflict," in this issue.
2. See generally Lauren Ploch, *Africa Command: U.S. Strategic Interests and the Role of the U.S. Military in Africa*, Congressional Research Service [CRS] Report for Congress RL 24003 (Washington, D.C.: updated 10 March 2008).
3. Claudia E. Anyaso, "An Overview of AFRICOM: A Unified Combatant Command" (address, WIIS–U.S. Army War College AFRICOM Conference, Washington, D.C., 22 April 2008), available at www.state.gov. Anyaso is director of the Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs for African Affairs.
4. See generally Darren Taylor, "Skepticism Abounds as AFRICOM Launch Looms," *Voice of America*, 26 May 2008, www.voanews.com/english/.
5. For detail on the APS, see Sohn, "Global Fleet Station," in this issue.
6. See Ronald E. Ratcliff, "Building Partners' Capacity: The Thousand-Ship Navy," *Naval War College Review* 60, no. 4 (Autumn 2007), pp. 45–58.
7. See U.S. Defense Dept., "Special DoD Briefing with Gen. Ward and Admiral Ulrich from the Pentagon, Arlington, VA," news transcript, 15 October 2007, available at www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/.
8. See Mark Bellamy, Kathleen Hicks, and J. Stephen Morrison, *Strengthening AFRICOM's Case* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 8 March 2008), available at www.csis.org/media/csis.
9. See, e.g., Jonathan Stevenson, "The Somali Model?" *National Interest*, no. 90 (July/August 2007).

10. See Thomas Barnett, "Continental Ambitions," *Guardian*, 20 December 2007; Ginny Hill, "Military Focuses on Development in Africa," *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 June 2007.